

The Churches and the Battle against Anti-Semitism

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I presume to introduce my brief presentation concerning relations with the Christian communities in the context of the struggle against resurgent anti-Semitism with two preliminary comments.

Firstly, I believe profoundly that while fighting anti-Semitism is an important aspect of Jewish-Christian relations, it is neither the purpose nor the ultimate reason why I devote so much time and energy to the subject. There are in fact several good rationales for such, but above all I believe that the work of promoting respectful dialogue with the Christian world is nothing less than the obligation of *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying the Divine Name in the world.¹

Secondly, allow me to state the obvious, that all too often we hear and see not only that which we choose to, but also that which we have preconceived.

The extensive history of Jewish suffering caused in the name of Christianity needs no elaboration.² However, most Jews are unfamiliar with modern Christianity and the changes that have taken place with it during the last fifty years in particular³ and therefore perceive it as still overwhelmingly hostile. The trauma of our historical experience is of course compounded by the specter of resurgent anti-Semitism and our historical perceptions and even prejudices (albeit born out of an unquestionable reality) are reinforced by it.

In addition, there is the all too well known fact that what makes a news story and sells papers is bad news, not good news. Few people seriously research issues and their factual responses. These would appear to be the reasons why the picture that most Jews – including most Jewish leaders – have of Christian attitudes generally and of Christian reactions, or rather lack thereof in relation to recent waves of anti-Semitic manifestations, is a distorted one.

I will briefly refer to the changes in religious teaching itself. Even though the World Council of Churches already referred in 1949 to anti-Semitism as a “sin against God and humanity,”⁴ arguably the watershed in the transformation of Christian teaching towards Jews and Judaism, dismantling the theological bases for anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, came with the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council convened by Pope John XXIII. That Council issued the historic declaration known by its first words “*Nostra Aetate*,” which declared that any attempt to present the Jews as collectively guilty for the death of Jesus of Nazareth, either at the time or subsequently, is wrong and against what was upheld to be true Christian teaching. Moreover the declaration affirmed that the Divine Covenant with the Jewish people is eternal and unbroken and that it is therefore wrong to present the Jewish people as rejected let alone cursed by the Almighty, or to suggest that it has been replaced by the Church. The statement further condemned anti-Semitism as sinful.⁵ After *Nostra Aetate* there were many further notable declarations as documents, such as the 1975 “Guidelines,” the 1985 “Notes,” the 1998 document on “The Church and Racism” which not only went into detail in its condemnation of anti-Semitism but also condemned “the anti-Zionism that often serves as a vehicle for anti-Semitism,” the declaration on the Shoah “We Remember,” and the most recent document on “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures.”

The bottom line of the “new theology” towards Jews and Judaism is a respect for the integrity of Judaism and an end to proselytizing efforts.

Naturally it takes time before an institution, especially a venerable religious institution, truly internalizes change. It takes even longer for such change to find its way fully into educational and instructional materials. Furthermore, the pace of these processes is also dependant upon the socio-cultural context in which the respective communities live. However the effect has been profound upon the Church, and in the U.S., most recent studies on Catholic educational materials have revealed an unqualified positive view of Jews, Judaism and Israel.⁶

Protestant denominations cannot be compared in structure and authority to that of the Catholic Church, for better and worse. Accordingly the transformation may not appear quite as striking. Nevertheless, similar processes have taken place among Protestant mainline denominations; particularly notable has been the courageous and categorical repudiation of Luther’s anti-Semitism by the Lutheran Church.⁷ The extent to which this transformation has taken place within the Protestant churches is powerfully evident in the declaration of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship. This is a network binding together the majority of Protestant Churches in Europe. In 2001 it issued an extensive document entitled “Church and Israel.” Inter alia this document “confesses the guilt (of the churches) towards Israel for their share in the Shoah in different ways” and declares their commitment to do everything to change and rectify the causes and sources of that guilt. It affirms the unique bond with the Jewish people as “an indispensable part of the Foundation of (Christian) Faith,” but arguably most notably of all it proposes “a strong argument for the Churches to refrain from any activity directed specifically to converting Jews to Christianity.” One might note that the whole process of this historic declaration and articulation of theological positions was made in concert with a Jewish scholarly advisory board of which Professor Chanah Safrai of Jerusalem was very much the leading resource.⁸ Accordingly both Catholic and mainline Protestant Churches have overwhelmingly abandoned any formal missionary activities to convert Jews to Christianity (small marginal groups with such orientation do not have official backing).

The only serious proselytizing efforts of any systematic character come precisely from Evangelical fundamentalist quarters, whose very theology insists on one exclusive path to salvation, without which a person is condemned to perdition. As this theology goes hand in glove with a Biblical fundamentalism which sees its vision of final redemption as linked to the return of the Jewish people to its ancestral homeland in keeping with Biblical prophecy, such Evangelical Fundamentalism is generally highly supportive of the State of Israel. Accordingly it has been warmly welcomed in many Israeli and Jewish quarters – especially in the wake of the traumatic violence of the last few years. Paradoxically however, this often means embracing those who are precisely the ones who still maintain a classical exclusivist theology with a vision of a society in which there is no room for Jews or anyone else who does not share their beliefs.

Returning to the Catholic and main-line Protestant Churches, in the face of the most recent resurgent manifestations of anti-Semitism, there have been renewed forthright condemnations and warnings from an array of religious groups, church synods and bishops conferences. Examples of the latter are the Dutch bishops (3/5/2002), the French bishops (3/4/2002), the Bulgarian Churches (21/2/2002), the

World Lutheran Federation (17/9/2001), and the Alliance of Baptists (25/4/2003), to name but a few.

The Pope's frequent statements condemning anti-Semitism, which he has also described as "a sin against God and humanity"⁹ and which were reiterated in the course of the last year¹⁰ were supported with a powerful text published by Cardinal Kasper¹¹ and impressive statements by other Cardinals, perhaps most notably that of Cardinal Tucci.¹² These and other statements from Catholic leaders were acknowledged with gratitude by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel in its declaration at the conclusion of the meeting of the interreligious bilateral commission of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See.¹³

In the wake of the bombing of the synagogues in Istanbul, eloquent statements of solidarity with the Jewish community and condemnation of anti-Semitic violence were issued by a wide range of Christian leaders. These included the joint statement of the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch and the Archbishop of Canterbury,¹⁴ and an array of American religious leaders and churches representing the spectrum of American Christianity.¹⁵

Numerous statements of a similar vein were issued by American church leaders in recent years on the occasion of Yom HaShoah. Beyond the U.S., particularly notable declarations included that of the Primate of Ireland, Sean Brady¹⁶ and the heads of the Anglican and Catholic Churches in the U.K., Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor and the Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, who has reinforced the remarkable solidarity with the Jewish community demonstrated by his predecessor, Lord Carey.¹⁷ We have recently seen many additional impressive statements excoriating anti-Semitism, including those of Canadian Primates Cardinal Ouellet and Archbishop Andrew Hutchinson.¹⁸

The fact of the matter is that as the late Geoffrey Wigoder put it, official Church teaching today is not only no longer part of the problem, but actually part of the solution.¹⁹

However the question that needs to be addressed is one of strategy, regarding how to capitalize on this transformation and truly promote our interests in relation to and through the Christian world. In this regard there has been an enormous contrast between U.S. Jewry and Israeli Jewry. The difference is a natural and obvious one. Western Jewry lives albeit in a predominantly secular society, but one in which the dominant religious ethos is Christian. Israeli Jewry lives in a very different context – a Jewish State – in which most Israelis never encounter a Christian. Indeed even when Israelis travel abroad, they tend to meet non-Jews as non-Jews and rarely as modern Christians. As a result, the image of Christianity is still overwhelmingly culled from the tragic past.

However, in the U.S. the level of fraternal cooperation on the part of the Jewish community – in particular, its defense and human relations agencies – with Christian leadership, is unparalleled.

It is true that positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have led to a cooling of relations with much of the mainline Protestant denominations, as the latter and the Jewish community's positions have polarized, especially in most recent times. While I do believe that some of these attitudes within mainline Protestant

denominations do derive from more insidious sources, much of it is simply a response to the cries of their local Arab Christian Palestinian communities and thus the subsequent comments I will make below regarding tactics are not only relevant to combating distorted and perverted images of Israel but also to the real interests of Diaspora Jewry's own relations with mainline Protestant Christianity. Notwithstanding, there is still extremely close collaboration on a wide spectrum of social and civic issues between the U.S. Jewish and main-line Protestant communities.

However the most remarkable transformation in the U.S. is that which has not only reflected but even impacted upon the transformation in Rome – namely, relations between Catholics and Jews in the U.S. This is to be seen in a whole spectrum of relations and dialogues reflected in the numerous Catholic institutes for Jewish studies and Catholic-Jewish relations. Arguably the most striking example – especially when one considers the fact that the Catholic communities in Israel are overwhelmingly Palestinian, led by an outspoken nationalist Palestinian Patriarch – is that when the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Synod discusses proposals/statements on the Middle East, prior consultations take place with Jewish religious leaders. Accordingly, the declarations that have been released by the USCCB on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, have been among the most fair and balanced statements to have come out from a Christian hierarchical body.²⁰

However, even if Palestinian propaganda and in particular Christian Palestinian propaganda has put strain on that relationship, the behavior of the State of Israel (and sometimes lack of behavior) has played its significant part as well.

I of course am referring here primarily to the attitude of the State both towards its own Christian communities and towards Christians who seek to spend periods of time in the country. But I am also referring to Israel's flagrant disregard of international commitments it has made concerning Christians.

I leave aside the disgraceful poverty of budgetary allocations, which when the Ministry of Religious Affairs existed, consisted of just 2.9% of the Ministry's budget for the approximately twenty per cent non-Jewish citizenry of the State in the year 2000.²¹ Certainly neglect has done its harm, but even when the State of Israel has involved itself in Christian affairs, it has generally done so in a manner guaranteed to alienate the local communities (impacting upon perceptions internationally) and do much harm to Israel's image.

This was evident a few years ago in the attempt by Arik Sharon and Bibi Netanyahu (when the latter was premier) to block the appointment of Melchite Archbishop Boutros Mouallem.²² Aside from the deplorably bad intelligence that could have led anyone to conclude that this truly peaceful spiritual man, who is actually a friend of the Jewish people, could present any threat to the State, the attempt to deny his appointment flagrantly ignored Israel's commitment made in the Fundamental Agreement with the Vatican.²³ Moreover, even if Israel had not been morally bound by its international commitments, it should have been obvious that such interference in the internal affairs of the Church would be bound to elicit international condemnation and Israel would be forced to back down and only end up with egg on its face – as was indeed the case. Evidently this lesson had still not been learnt, as was revealed in the case of the appointment of the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Ireneios I. Again the authorities were victims of faulty

intelligence and perhaps vested material interests that couched themselves in pious nationalist sentiment. However aside from the substance, the lack of political savvy and above all the insensitivity towards Christian sensibilities was astounding. Inevitably again, Israel had to back down and confirm its recognition of the Patriarch.²⁴

Let me return to the Fundamental Agreement with the Vatican. The State of Israel succeeded in enlisting the personal intervention of the Pope to ensure that the Agreement was signed at the end of 1993²⁵ and Ambassadors exchanged some six months later. This happened despite the Vatican's Secretariat of State's desire for a prior resolution of two outstanding issues. These concerned the legal status of Church authorities and matters of tax exemption for Church assets and personnel.²⁶ The compromise reached between the parties appeared in the text of the Fundamental Agreement, indicating that Israel was to do its best to resolve the two issues within two years.²⁷ While Israel and the Vatican did reach an agreed formula on the legal agreement after four years,²⁸ the agreement was never given force in Israeli law despite the commitment of the then Director General to do so.²⁹ As far as the fiscal matters are concerned these have dragged on for ten years with no indication that Israel has any intention to resolve the matter.³⁰ Even more serious, Israel promised the Vatican that until the subject was resolved, no steps would be taken to do anything that would prejudice the position of the church's institutions on the matter. Yet this was precisely what happened when in recent times Israel started demanding payment of taxes that had previously been part of the de facto exemption. Also in contravention of the Fundamental Agreement has been the deplorable policy of the Ministry Interior concerning visas³¹ and despite the promises of the current Minister, the situation has continued to be troubling. The failure of the Ministry of the Interior during recent governments to deal intelligently and compassionately with the needs of the various Christian institutions in Israel – including even the Evangelical Christian organizations that are active on behalf of Israel politically³² – has done much damage to Israel's image and credibility.

I am not suggesting that in any of these cases there is evil intent (though I am also not totally convinced that there has not been some of this), but rather it is primarily sloppiness, stupidity and an amazing lack of strategic consideration in relation to the Christian world. There has been little or no appreciation of the fact that not only is the wellbeing of the local Christian communities a matter of basic human rights – but something which impacts upon the minds and attitudes of billions of Christians around the world. Just in case there are any among you thinking along the lines of Stalin, who belittled the Catholic Church declaring “how many divisions does the Pope have?” one might note that the first destination of Gorbachev outside the Warsaw Pact countries after his declaration of Perestroika and Glasnost was to St. Peter's,³³ showing that you do not have to have divisions and munitions in order to have influence!

Other episodes concerning Christians in Israel have revealed this failure in strategic thought – the controversy over the Shehab-a-Din mosque near the Basilica in Nazareth, serving as another example. Both Labor and Likud governments allowed themselves to capitulate or at best compromise with the squatting tactics of the Islamic Movement in the city, instead of standing firm.³⁴ In the final analysis, the considerations were a matter of simple mathematics. There are three quarters of a million Muslim voters in Israel and less than a hundred and

fifty thousand openly professing Christians. However the latter were able to enlist enormous international pressure which forced Arik Sharon to rethink his predecessors' decisions and eventually matters were restored to the status quo ante.³⁵ Amazingly there were actually politicians who expected local Christians to show gratitude to the government, despite the substantial prior distress that both Likud and Labor governments had caused the Christian communities. Although it would only compound matters for them to publicly admit it, Christians in the Galilee (as elsewhere in the Arab world) already felt under siege by the dominant Muslim community around them, and took solace in Israeli democracy's rule of law. Accordingly, in this case they felt especially abandoned by the Jewish State.

Not unrelated to this is the major challenge referred to above, which Israel faces in relation to the local Christian communities; namely that they are overwhelmingly Arab and have a profound interest in good relations with their immediate neighbors, the much larger Muslim communities. This of course is especially so in Jerusalem and the West Bank, where they are subject to enormous nationalist pressure to show their loyalty to the Palestinian cause.³⁶ All too often this manifests itself through enlisting their co-religionists internationally for the Palestinian nationalist cause with propaganda hostile to the State of Israel, which impacts upon perceptions among Christians worldwide and sours attitudes towards Israel and even toward Jewish communities worldwide that stand solidly behind the Jewish State. However, if Israel really wants to counteract this, she will not succeed in doing so by wagging her finger, nor by crying "gevalt." Only if the local Christian communities really feel that their interests are genuinely and seriously considered by the Israeli government and that their positive relations with it are to their practical advantage and interest will attitudes develop more constructively within the local communities and have a positive impact internationally. Israel's behavior in the past has made many, if not most of them substantially skeptical as to how much the Jewish State really cares about them at all.³⁷

This is in no way to excuse any Christian who does not take a stand against anti-Semitism, both on theological as well as historical grounds. However in the battle against anti-Semitism, Israel has an enormous potential strategic ally in the Churches that is not adequately utilized. If Israel is to really capitalize upon this potential, it has to start relating very differently toward Christians living in and coming to the Jewish State. This requires a coordinated effort, if not through a centralized authority under the Prime Minister then at least through an inter-ministerial body in coordination with the security authorities, which has clear and definite governmental patronage. Such an authority needs to take into account issues that relate to the local communities, treatment of Christians entering and exiting the country, as well as relations with Christian communities abroad and their relations with respective governments. Until that happens, I fear that we will continue to squander much of what is not only no longer the source of the problem, but in fact a potential strategic asset both for the general interests of the State of Israel and for the struggle against anti-Semitism worldwide.

¹ Lev. 22 v.31,32. Seder Eliyahu Rabba, 26,2; Yalkut, Devarim 6 v.5 (cf: TB, Yoma 86a; TB, Sotah 10b; TJ, Bava Metzia 2:5; Tosefta Bava Kama 10,16

² See "The Anguish of the Jews" Edward H. Flannery, McMillan, 1965

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- ³ David Rosen address to the ILC – Jerusalem, March 1994
- ⁴ Statement from the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam, 1948 on “The Christian Approach to the Jews
- ⁵ See www.jcrelations.net
- ⁶ See study by P. Cunningham, www.bc.edu/research/cjl/
- ⁷ ELCA statement, 18/4/1994. See www.j-cinstitute.org
- ⁸ “Church and Israel”, Leuenberg Documents, 6; Lembeck Press, Frankfurt am Main, 2001, ISBN3-87476-3927
- ⁹ Papal address to Jewish leaders in Budapest, August 18, 1991
- ¹⁰ the latest being in May – see CNA, 24/5/2004
- ¹¹ Osservatore Romano, 9/9/2003
- ¹² CWNews.com, 6/1/2003
- ¹³ Zenit News Service, 4/12/2003
- ¹⁴ BBC News World Edition and Turkish Daily News, 19/11/2003
- ¹⁵ NY Times, ADL advert, 3/12/2003; ELCA News Service 25/11/2003; NCC News Service 20/10/2003
- ¹⁶ Zenit News Service, 27/1/2004
- ¹⁷ Religion News Service, 28/1/2004, report by Robert Nowell
- ¹⁸ Canadian Jewish News, 1/4/2004
- ¹⁹ Address to the International Jewish-Catholic Liaison Committee meeting, Jerusalem, March 1994
- ²⁰ <http://www.usccb.org>
- ²¹ Foundation for Middle East Peace, address by Ori Nir, Washington 30/4/2003
- ²² Michael S. Arnold “Test of Faiths”, Jerusalem Post Magazine 28/8/1998; Akiva Eldar, Haaretz 6/8/1998
- ²³ Fundamental Agreement, Article 3,2
- ²⁴ RNS, 28/1/2004
- ²⁵ “Israel Dossier – a secret meeting” Inside the Vatican, 1/1994. cf. “Conversation with Yossi Beilin” Shaikha Ben Porat, TA, HaKibbutz HaMeuchad, 1996
- ²⁶ Jerusalem Post, 8/1/1993
- ²⁷ Article 10, 2a & 2c
- ²⁸ Jerusalem Post, 10/11/1997
- ²⁹ letter to Archbishop De Montezemolo from Eitan Ben Zur, 11/1997
- ³⁰ See Asia News, 9/3/2004 “Israel-Holy See: No apparent fruit after 10 years of diplomatic relations”
- ³¹ Jerusalem Post, 8/4/2004 “Church officials say Israel delaying visas” / “Apostolic delegate in Jerusalem protests”
- ³² Daphna Berman “Red tape baffles Christian volunteers in search of visas” Haaretz, 28/5/2004
- ³³ 29/11/1989. Twenty days after the fall of the Berlin Wall
- ³⁴ See overview of episode in Drew Christianson “Palestinian Christians: Recent Developments” in The Vatican-Israel Accords, political, legal and theological concerns; ed. M. Breyer, University of Notre Dame Press, 2004
- ³⁵ See The Christian Century, 199 no. 6, 13/3/2002. cf “Religious Freedom in Nazareth” Jerusalem Post, 5/3/2002
- ³⁶ “Microcosms & Multiple Minorities” – The Christian Communities in Israel; Daniel Rossing, Israel Year Book & Almanac, 1999
- ³⁷ See Document of the Coordinator of Israel Government Activities in the Territories, translated and cited by ETRFI, 13/5/2004